

THE AFRTS BROADCAST CENTER

The 1970s and 1980s brought great changes to AFRTS, in organization, in programming and in program delivery. New technology evolved. New chains of command developed. Yet, it was the program packages, the "programming," that remained the heart of the operation.

Without a doubt, AFRTS enjoyed its greatest period for creating programming during World War II. Yet, when the fighting stopped, entertainers became less and less available or willing to appear on AFRTS-produced shows for free. Funding diminished. Without financing, the reductions in production became inevitable. Radio service phased out most of its creative activities. Television changed directions as well. The AFRTS renamed their Los Angeles programming arm the "Broadcast Center" in 1966.

In the early days, the AFRTS Programming Center in Los Angeles produced and delivered in-house shows like "Command Performance," "Mail Call" and "Jubilee." By the 1980s, however, the AFRTS entertainment packages contained pretty much the same commercial network or syndicated programming which was available to audiences in the United States. The creativity that did exist in Hollywood involved the production of programs that contained informational, educational and patriotic themes. In other words, those, which justified their expense.

Over the years, these latter productions also disappeared. That left AFRTS radio with only regularly-produced disc jockey programs like the Charlie Tuna, Wolfman Jack and the Gene Price show. While some entertainment production continued in radio, AFRTS never seriously considered producing its own entertainment shows for TV.

Even though AFRTS divorced itself from the program production business, the need for state-of-the-art programming for both radio and TV continued to be crucial. A great variety of programming was available from the commercial networks. Therefore, this effort didn't require the same type of artistic prowess that produced a "Command Performance," "The Bill Cosby Show" or even "The A-Team." For better or worse, that "look and feel" of stateside television became a fundamental characteristic of AFRTS programming. Because it was often the only game in town, the AFRTS outlets had to program to meet

the needs of a widely diverse audience. These audiences ranged from senior officers to the youngest enlisted man or woman, and from generals' spouses to the wives and children of the enlisted men, all official members of the AFRTS audience.

That's a significant challenge.

HOW PROGRAMMING REACHES THE TROOPS

On the television side, AFRTS programmers in the Broadcast Center select programming from the commercial networks, e.g., ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC. They also work with PBS and agreements to air programming also exist with major cable networks like CNN, ESPN, USA and others. Favorable agreements also exist with the shows produced by major "indies," the independent stations. It's an extraordinary volume of the world's best English-language offerings in television, and it's what has made AFRTS so valuable to command and to morale of U. S. troops. Managing a balanced package of these top-rated shows along with the necessary command information and education - "Rosanne" with "Americana" for example - requires an artistry of its own. No doubt, this includes at least a thorough knowledge of the complicated business of programming. While the primary responsibility for delivering all this good programming rests with the Broadcast Center, the evolution of what the soldier finally sees comes from the individual stations. Major influences come from the audience and from the network's or station's own programming experience and feedback the network or station manager's style. For example, rather than broadcast "CNN News" continuously, the station manager might first emphasize command information programming. He might follow that with segments of CNN's production augmenting his own locally-produced newscast. Then, in the wee hours, the station might rely on the Broadcast Center's work entirely, figuratively "flipping the switch" to a straight, unmodified feed at the day's end. Then they'd switch back to the first station-customized show the next morning.

Functioning under DoD Directive 5120.20, the AFRTS Broadcast Center has the mission of negotiating for, procuring and distributing radio and television materials. It also supports the free flow of news, information and entertainment without censorship, propagandizing or manipulation. While not formally contained in the mission statement, the Broadcast Center's job is, of course, to help overseas Commanders sustain morale and enhance readiness. By improving their quality of life, AFRTS-BC contributes to both a more motivated military and higher retention rates.

As one means of aiding the outlets, the Broadcast Center continually scouts for new sources of programming, these

days that often means from the rapidly growing cable television industry.

It also seeks rights to movies. Complicating the problem is the troops' large appetite for movies and the risque content of today's feature movies. In 1984, the Broadcast Center distributed more than 400 feature films. That's more than the average number of Hollywood releases in a year! At the same time, the film industry went more toward the production of "R"-rated motion pictures which AFRTS can't use until the Broadcast Center has edited them. AFRTS movies must meet community standards as determined by the commercial networks and the editors of in-flight movies for airlines. Because of this trend away from family entertainment, it became increasingly difficult for the BC to fill its movie needs. According to the October 18, 1985, issue of *Variety*, more than half (50.3%) of all films produced between 1968 and 1985 had an "X" or "R" rating.

With the increased demand for programming, AFRTS also had to produce a proportionally greater number of spot announcements to replace the deleted ads.

The production and procurement of spots became a DoD-level function. With less than seven hundred television spots in the inventory and more than seven thousand availabilities to fill each week during 1984, repetition became unavoidable. DoD began to "farm out" contracts for more production of internal information spots. To add emphasis without over-exposure, DoD assigned "impact values" or weights to the spots it used. According to Colonel David Cole, AFRTS-BC Commander from 1981-1985, "what was needed was a greater inventory - some of which might come from topical material produced by local stations." (6)

THE LARGEST RADIO AND TELEVISION NETWORK IN THE WORLD

To meet this mission, the Broadcast Center (then the Programming Center) had a staff of ninety-six civilians and a joint service force of forty-five military people. In addition, the Navy provided an eight-man detachment to support the unique requirements of the Navy. In fiscal year 1985, the PC had a budget of \$27.9 million. That enabled AFRTS to reach an audience of over 1.2 million. This audience included active duty military personnel, DoD civilians, and family members in forty-five countries, fifteen U.S. territories or possessions, and aboard Navy ships at sea. By the middle of 1985, AFRTS had become the largest radio and television network in the world.

A primary target audience for AFRTS is active duty personnel in the 18-25 year age group. Most have a high school education. Many are away from home for the first time and often lack the motivation and money to go off-base and enjoy the advantages of an overseas assignment.

There is always a temptation for this group to seek relief from loneliness and boredom in alcohol or drug use. So, the BC makes a special effort to provide the kind of programming they like. The aim is that "AFRTS, not alcohol, will be the after-duty diversion of choice."

THE "SHADOW" AUDIENCE

The AFRTS outlets have always attracted a significant "shadow" audience. U.S. civilians living abroad and citizens of host nations listen to or watch the American programming. Some do so as a source of information and entertainment. Others watch or listen as an aid in developing an English language capability. Still others do so out of curiosity about the American life-style. DoD has never officially established a firm count of the non-American listeners. Yet, a study in Japan indicated that twenty-one percent of the local population - or 25-million people - tuned in to AFRTS radio at least once a week! The official U. S. position has always been that such "shadow audiences" are spillover. AFRTS has always considered their viewer- or listener-ship as superfluous to their objective. Therefore, AFRTS does not program for the shadow audience. It doesn't even consider it in the selection of broadcast material. Only in a case of host nation sensitivity does AFRTS ever pay attention to the foreign listening audience.

The Broadcast Center has always based its decisions about programs on the DoD audiences. Overseas outlets periodically conduct audience surveys and send the results to Los Angeles. The BC maintains contact with AFRTS network and the station program directors and talks with senior public affairs officers in the field. They in turn talk with their commanders. They combine this information with that of the various rating services (i.e., Arbitron, Nielsen, et al) and newspaper and magazine program reviews. Then, they determine what material will go into the programming packages.

When AFRTS has compared these inputs, the results weren't surprising. The troops abroad still want "a little bit of home" - the same shows that are popular stateside. So, the Broadcast Center has accommodated them. During the 1984-85 television season, the BC acquired and distributed 93.4 percent of all network prime-time series and every one of the 35 most popular series as ranked by A.C. Nielsen. In addition, the Center acquired all winners of the "Alpha" awards for excellence in children's programming.

AFRTS-BC committed to providing a good representation of stateside programming, not just the most popular stuff. During the course of the year, they broadcast all manner of programming. That included programs of particular interest to minority groups and even religious programming. Often, most of the military audiences

abroad had no alternative source of English language television programming.

In accomplishing its mission, the Broadcast Center avoids targeting any particular audience segment exclusively. It works instead to provide a cross-section of material that will have appeal to most, if not all, of its audience.

The BC's staff does not exclude a program or a series simply because the subject matter is controversial. It doesn't shy away from a viewpoint just because it may differ from that of the current administration in the White House. Its primary consideration is simple. Has the program aired in the United States? If people back home have had an opportunity to see or hear the material, the personnel overseas should have the same opportunity.

PRIME-TIME PROGRAMMING

Once AFRTS-BC decides to acquire a program or series, their actual success in obtaining it depends on several things. One is funding. During 1985, AFRTS had \$9.9 million allocated for acquisition and duplication. The Broadcast Center benefited from the continuing favorable rates, which the television networks, independent producers and program distributors have historically granted to the military. It continued to enjoy a total waiver of fees, which the broadcast guilds and entertainment unions impose on commercial broadcasters.

Their efforts, especially in view of the volume and excellence of their work, are very cost-efficient. For example, one independent television station in Los Angeles may pay \$120,000 to broadcast a single episode of "Magnum P.I." That's for rights within their local area. AFRTS pays \$1,470 to distribute the same show worldwide. A major United States network may pay up to \$900,000 an hour for network-wide use of a popular show. AFRTS still pays only \$1,470.

Despite this cooperation by its program sources, AFRTS has at times experienced delays in acquiring materials because commercial distributors wanted first to market their programs and movies overseas. U.S. nations where a local television system is compatible with the AFRTS and broadcast standard (NTSC), the distributor has often restricted particular programs until it could exploit the commercial value of the program. The most recent restriction problems of this nature occurred in Panama and Korea. To compensate, the AFRTS Broadcast Center sent special supplemental programming to these networks to help offset the loss in their weekly program packages.

EIGHT CENTS ON THE DOLLAR

About 63 percent of AFRTS programming comes from the commercial networks. It consists primarily of news and sports. Except for an annual administrative cost clearing

individual programs, AFRTS-BC receives these programs for free. The balance of the programming comes from the distributors and producers who market most of the entertainment, and some of the sports programming, in the United States. AFRTS pays a standard rate for most of these programs. Conservative estimates place the value of television programs AFRTS distributed during 1984 at more than \$117 million when compared with regional market rates. The Broadcast Center spent \$9.9 million, including duplication costs, or about 8-1/2 cents on the dollar. The cost per potential AFRTS audience member works out to 69 cents a month for the best television America has to offer.

Despite its success in obtaining programming, AFRTS receives occasional complaints about the type and quality of its offerings. Just as not all viewers back home like every network program or agree with all viewpoints expressed, not all members of the overseas military audience will like everything they see and hear.

AVOIDING CENSORSHIP

While seeking to upgrade the quality of its material, AFRTS continues to offer shows which viewers in the United States prefer. Only by having an audience tuned-in can AFRTS fulfill its aim of providing information messages. The Broadcast Center applies industry-wide criteria and "Standards and Practices" along with obvious good taste in choosing and scheduling programs. Even so, some in the AFRTS audience can occasionally find some of the programs "offensive." This is unavoidable if AFRTS is going to provide a true cross-section of popular programs. It also certifies AFRTS' tradition of credibility with the audience.

While carefully avoiding the role of censor, the Broadcast Center prints program advisories to stations as an aid in placing shows on local schedules. The BC flags violent and mature material to alert program directors about where they should schedule such shows.(3)

DELIVERING THE ENORMOUS VOLUME OF PROGRAMMING

In 1985, AFRTS provided programming to 88 land-based AM/FM radio stations and 35 land-based television outlets. It served more than 450 shipboard radio facilities, more than 500 shipboard television closed-circuit operations and more than 250 mini-television sites. In addition, the Broadcast Center operated a 24-hour radio and television service for news and special events via satellite and shortwave. For radio, Los Angeles weekly provided 80 hours of material on disks in the AM package and 14 hours in an alternative FM tape music package. The BC also sent out six hours of library music each week for disk jockeys to use on their local radio

shows. They distributed nearly 50 hours of holiday programming annually to help local outlets produce their own material. In cooperation with the Navy detachment, the Broadcast Center also sent out 84 radio hours each week on tape to support ships at sea.

During the same year, for television audiences, the Broadcast Center distributed approximately 80 hours of material on video cassettes each week to 17 circuits around the world. The package of non-time-sensitive material included weekly series, mini-series and made-for-television and theatrical movies. The cost of duplication made it necessary to "bicycle" the packages. After each station used it, the package, it would send it to the next. In areas where the audience included military families, the BC also provided a family-oriented package. They sent 12 hours of timely material on video cassette every week to each non-SATNET outlet. This special package included perishable entertainment programs, sporting events, and news and information specials normally only available to SATNET outlets.

DELIVERING TO REMOTE-AREA TROOPS AND NAVY SHIPS

For the 430 mini-TV outlets located at remote sites with small audiences, the BC provided up to 40 hours of entertainment programming. They also provided four additional hours of news and sports programming per week, directly to each mini-TV outlet. The outlets received their videotape machines and TV receivers directly from the military broadcasting services.

Until 1983, the Broadcast Center sent out more than 50 satellite "occasional use" live events each year to all major locations. They sent them to Italy, Germany and Spain, which were not yet in the 24-hour AFRTS satellite network (SATNET). The programs included such things as the Tournament of Roses Parade, the Super Bowl, World Series, and space shuttle launchings and landings. During 1983, as SATNET expanded 24-hour satellite support into Korea, Panama, Phillipines and other locations. The newly-renamed Broadcast Center ended the occasional-use satellite era.

AFRTS and the Navy Broadcasting Service (NBS) also began making additional use of the satellite network. NBS established land-based facilities to duplicate time-sensitive news and sports for distribution to ships. They located one on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and a second at Sigonella in Italy. From these facilities, they ferry the programs to the battle group aircraft carriers. From there, Navy helicopters fly the programs in cassette form to the smaller ships. This is a daily activity. After use, the ships return the tapes to the duplication facility for reuse.(1)

In 1983, the Navy Broadcasting Service began develop-

ing technology to put earth stations aboard large ships such as aircraft carriers and battleships. In a test aboard the *USS RANGER* in late 1983, the satellite tracking system worked well as the ship sailed from San Diego to Bremerton, Washington. The technology was successful as long as the ships were within range of the domestic satellite. However, the NBS continued to work on overcoming the problems of routine shipboard electronic interference in receiving an acceptable signal from international satellites.(2) Steel ships with sophisticated electronics and radar make lousy television environments.

AFRTS' mission of providing real time programming for SATNET and distribution of the entertainment package remained an enormous job. In 1985, the BC handled over a quarter-million video cassettes, 300,000 audio disks and 115,000 audio tapes – all shipped in more than 120,000 containers. These materials and the 24-hour daily satellite transmission enabled AFRTS to provide more than 36,000 hours of programming service during the year. The Broadcast Center had a staff of less than 150 employees to do all this work.

DELIVERY BY SATELLITE (SATNET)

Preparing entertainment packages and delivering them through normal mail channels is only part of the Broadcast Center's job. The arrival of SATNET has created the delivery of a 24-hour-a-day operation with news, information, sports and time sensitive entertainment. The satellite delivers this programming every day to worldwide audiences. SATNET had its official origins in a charter the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs issued in October, 1978. It instructed the American Forces Information Service to proceed with the planning of a worldwide AFRTS satellite network.

AFRTS developed a feasibility plan. Then it issued a contract to Future Systems of Gaithersburg, Maryland, to provide a technical review of the proposed system. In January, 1979, Future Systems delivered its findings. It concluded that the satellite network idea was technically sound. AFRTS contracted with the Electromagnetic Compatibility Analysis Center of Annapolis, Maryland, to study prospective earth station sites in the Pacific, European, Atlantic, and Southern Command areas.(4)

Just as armed forces broadcasting evolved from beginnings in Alaska in 1942, Phase I of the new satellite plan began at four sites in Alaska. They began on a test basis in December, 1978. The Alaskan Forces Satellite Network (AFSN) delivered programming from Elmendorf Air Force Base to the isolated facilities at Adak, Galena, King Salmon and Shemya. In January, 1979, AFSN went to a full-time operation. It telecast twelve hours a day and continued its broadcasting until April,

1982, when, the commercial Alaska State "BUSH" TV Satellite System became operational and took over the television service.

THE SOUTHERN COMMAND NETWORK

Panama is another location of pioneers in armed forces broadcasting. Phase I did not include it. But here, too, history repeated itself. The Southern Command Network (SCN) undertook construction of a satellite earth station at the end of 1978, thirty-eight years after the soldiers' first broadcast there. They expedited their modern-day efforts so that the facility would be in place quickly. They sought to avoid restrictions that might be imposed under terms of the new Panama Canal Zone Treaty, which was under negotiation. Meanwhile, during Phase II of the Satellite Network plan, the Broadcast Center leased a full-time dedicated uplink so that it could begin direct, full-time satellite transmission of its broadcasts. SCN completed the Panama earth station in April, 1979. The Southern Command Network (SCN) began full-time satellite service in August of that year using a domestic satellite transponder to deliver the AFSN signal. AFRTS in Los Angeles began to deliver their service in early 1982. This service provided programming for American Forces at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, using the same commercial satellite that was servicing Panama.

Phase III of the plan concerned itself with the establishment of the international portion of the satellite network. In December, 1982, the Atlantic satellite came into service. Its signal reached from Iceland to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Diego Garcia came on-line at once. Keflavik in Iceland began receiving programming in April, 1983, Lajes Field in the Azores in November, 1983, AFN in February, 1984, and Italy in July, 1985. Bermuda began service from the domestic satellite in February, 1985.

In the Pacific, AFRTS tested its transponder and began service in the fall of 1983. Korea joined SATNET in October. FEN at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines came on-line in January, 1984. Service began on a test basis in Okinawa and in Japan in the fall of 1985.

During 1985, negotiations continued with the governments of Spain and Turkey to allow satellite service. In Turkey, AFRTS developed plans to create a full network reaching all the United States military bases, however small their contingents. By the middle of 1986, most land-based, full-service networks and outlets were able to receive SATNET full-time.

As the SATNET system expanded, more and more stations went on line, and AFRTS decided to move from "occasional use" to transmitting material on a 24-hour-a-day basis with its real time capabilities. The Broadcast

Center had to resolve whether it should use SATNET to distribute the package in order to save costs of duplicating and mail service.

Such a method of operation would have also insured that each AFRTS facility would be broadcasting the same shows at approximately the same time. However, analysis showed that using the satellite in such a way would not be cost-effective. It would have to provide additional recording equipment and extra staff at each facility. This would have also meant less time available on the satellite for transmission of news and other time-sensitive material. Finally, sending out the copyrighted entertainment package by satellite would have opened the possibility of having the material pirated. That was a major concern of producers who provide the shows to AFRTS. Also programs would still need to be duplicated on tape for ships and mini-TV sites.

Ultimately, AFRTS decided to use SATNET primarily to deliver news, sports and other time-sensitive programming. SATNET also gave the Broadcast Center the ability to pass entire Secretary of Defense and Presidential news conferences overseas live or with minimum delay. As a rule, the commercial networks excerpt only a few ideas or statements from SECDEF conferences and they may not be the information of greatest interest to military audiences. By transmitting entire press conferences on a "short-fuse," tape-delay" basis, AFRTS gave overseas outlets the chance to view the complete press conference. Outlet news departments could then have the opportunity to excerpt portions of the questions and answers that might be of special interest to the military viewers.(5)

Despite the great advantages which SATNET offers to the Broadcast Center, its 24-hour-a-day operation has presented significant scheduling problems. Through the end of 1985, the BC was able to feed only 17-hours a day of decommercialized programming and DoD internal information spots. During the remaining seven hours, the BC provided a "dirty" (straight) feed taken directly from the CNN. This portion of the transmission schedule is a totally hands-off operation. There is no attempt to assist the field by removing commercials and inserting spots. According to Colonel Cole, the inability to provide decommercialized service 24-hours-a-day remained his "greatest disappointment" in developing the SATNET schedule.

A work-force study of the satellite operation concluded that it would take sixteen staff members in the Broadcast Center to expand decommercialized SATNET service to 24-hours-a-day. The increase in manpower would use the additional seven hours to provide more specialized service and programs from a variety of sources. These included specific sports events and news conferences. It would allow Broadcast Center to adjust its

programming more to the various overseas time zones. To Colonel Cole, this increase in service would be a vast improvement over the 1985 network. To simply feed seven straight hours of CNN daily, seems quite repetitive. Moreover, the change would save the overseas outlets from having to "decommercialize" the seven hours of material.

Whatever its immediate shortcomings, the improved service which SATNET provides helps AFRTS work toward its goal of holding audience interest. This comes at a time when the local outlets are no longer the only source of after-hour entertainment. Colonel Cole believes that, "If we lose the audience we'll be unable to accomplish our information mission."

Despite such problems, the Broadcast Center has continued the mission and traditions begun with AFRTS during World War II, fifty years ago. Today, delivery of armed forces broadcasting is an enormous job. As might be expected, the arrival of television, and more recently of SATNET, created a proportional shortage of working space. BC facilities, in the heart of Hollywood on McCadden Place, were already overcrowded.

So, in 1984, after years of searching for a suitable replacement, the Broadcast Center began to move into new facilities in the Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley. They completed the move in November 1986. In the new

spaces, the staff could more easily serve the needs of their audience.

By the late 1980s, AFRTS became a symbol of the decade's achievements in new and high technology. The Army, Navy and Air Force all refined their broadcasting operations.

All that would be needed as the American military continued to serve in its role as peacekeeper in the international community. That was particularly true in the Middle East and in Central America.

NOTES - CHAPTER 23

- (1) Interview with Roger Maynard, December 9, 1985.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Interview with Colonel David Cole, July 26, 1985; Briefing Paper which Colonel Cole presented to the United States Air Forces Europe, (USAFE) Commanders Conference at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, June 13, 1984, on the operation of AFRTS-BC.
- (4) Ibid; Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence Pollack, October 25, 1983.
- (5) Ibid; Cole interview.
- (6) Interview with Colonel Cole and June 13, 1984, briefing presentation on operation of AFRTS-BC.